

Mexico-Cuba: The Course of Relations

An Intelligence Assessment

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Mexico-Cuba: The Course of Relations (U)

An Intelligence Assessment

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**Mexico-Cuba:
The Course of Relations (U)**

Key Judgments

The basic relationship between Mexico and Cuba, which continues to serve domestic and international needs for both, is not expected to change substantially in the wake of the mid-May meeting between Fidel Castro and President Lopez Portillo. (S)

Little prospect exists, for example, for increased economic relations. (S)

Castro, seeing little chance of improving relations with Washington, probably saw the meeting as an opportunity to increase irritants in Mexican-US relations. (S)

Mexico will probably hold fast to its commitment to support Cuba's bid for a seat on the UN Security Council next year, and Lopez Portillo may accept Castro's invitation to attend the nonaligned summit. (S NF)

Mexico's break with Nicaragua was probably encouraged by Castro, but Lopez Portillo had doubtless pondered it for some time. (S NF)

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Mexico-Cuba: The Course of Relations (U)

The relationship between Mexico and Cuba continues to be mutually respectful and occasionally warm, but more a matter of form than substance. It continues to serve the domestic and international political needs of the two countries, but has little effect on their more concrete economic needs. Through Mexico's long association with Fidel Castro, President Lopez Portillo enhances his political standing with the left at home and embellishes his image of independence from the United States. For Castro, association with Mexico boosts his regime's Third World and hemispheric legitimacy. (S NF)

The purpose of the 17-18 May get-together at Cozumel was evidently to give the two leaders a chance to meet and to bolster Castro's image prior to the nonaligned summit in September. The joint communique indicated no major substantive agreements. It mentioned agricultural exchanges, sugar industry cooperation, and cultural and educational interchanges as well as support for the new international economic order, disarmament, and standard international principles. The only notable departure from the usual pattern was the call for an end to the economic blockade of Cuba and an indirect reference to the elimination of the US naval base at Guantanamo Bay. (S NF)

retorical inspiration—are significant and probably chiefly responsible for the successful personal dynamics of the summit. (S NF)

It appears that both men wanted the meeting, and both were apparently caught up in the attendant emotion. Lopez Portillo's admiration for Castro as one of the "prominent personalities of this century" appears genuine, although, as a self-proclaimed pragmatist, he recognizes there are few prospects for significant expansion of relations beyond solidarity on international issues. Lopez Portillo probably views Cuba essentially as a suitor—one with a certain exotic charm. (S NF)

Although Lopez Portillo praised Castro personally, he avoided commenting on the Cuban political system. This became more noticeable when, during Costa Rican President Carazo's visit two days later, Lopez Portillo lauded Costa Rica's liberal democracy as "the system in which we believe." (S NF)

Castro held the spotlight most of the time which probably suited Lopez Portillo, who expected to profit more from the *fact* of the visit than from the specifics. The summit reaffirmed Mexico's independence from US influence and boosted Lopez Portillo's standing with leftists at home just six weeks before the first national election test of his party under the new political reform program. Not coincidentally, he invited leaders of the four opposition parties of the left to the Cozumel summit. (S NF)

The Summit: Mexico

In view of the history of Mexico's relations with Cuba, it was probably inevitable that the two leaders would meet and reasonable to expect that they would be attracted to each other. The cultural, historical, and emotional ties—from which Castro drew frequent

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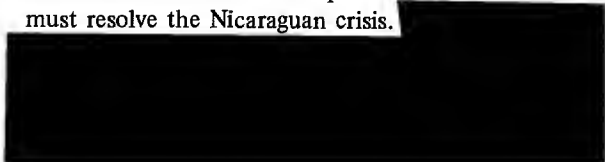


The President's reasons for simultaneously removing two other Cabinet ministers appear unrelated to the Castro visit or the elections, except that the departure of more conservative Foreign Secretary Roel—probably simply for deficient performance—would be seen as balancing somewhat Reyes' removal. In short, though the motives for these actions are probably diverse, the timing has enabled Lopez Portillo to present Mexico's body politic with a number of ideologically countervailing moves that, in sum, should alienate neither the right nor the left. (S NF NC OC)

The breaking of relations with Nicaragua two days after Castro's departure tilted that balance more toward the left. Lopez Portillo had probably been pondering the break for some time, but Castro—who bitterly denounced Somoza at the Cozumel summit—may have been the impetus to action. (S NF)

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Lopez Portillo may have felt that such a dramatic step as breaking relations was needed to prod the United States into acting forcefully against Somoza; the Mexican President has said in the past that the United States must resolve the Nicaraguan crisis.



It is unlikely that Lopez Portillo expected to use the Cozumel meeting to budge Castro on the Treaty of Tlatelolco, which prohibits nuclear weapons in Latin America. In view of Lopez Portillo's parallel interest in conventional arms restraint, however, he may have felt some concern over Cuban acquisition of Soviet MIG-23s last year. (S NF)

Although Mexican oil sales to Cuba reportedly were discussed in general terms, the long-rumored quadrilateral oil deal—Mexican delivery of crude to Cuba on Soviet account in exchange for Soviet deliveries to Mexico's European customers, all in order to save on transportation costs—was apparently not consummated. In fact, Mexico would have to work out details with the USSR, not Cuba, and for the past year at least none of

the parties concerned have seemed particularly enthusiastic about the matter. (S NF)

The Summit : Cuba

From the Cuban perspective, politics—rather than economics—provided the rationale for the trip. No agenda had been prepared for the talks, according to the Cuban press, and over half of Castro's 29-hour stay was taken up by ceremonial functions, spearfishing, and sightseeing. The two sides would seem to have had time to do little more than agree on the wording of the final communique. (S NF)

The Castro regime was initially concerned that Lopez Portillo would pursue a foreign policy more closely aligned with the United States than his predecessor, Luis Echeverria, and has been pleasantly surprised by his independent attitude toward Washington. Encouraged by what Cuba considered an unsuccessful trip by President Carter to Mexico in February, and by Mexico's subsequent willingness to support Cuba's bid for a seat on the UN Security Council next year, Castro probably looked at the summit in part as an opportunity to try to increase irritants in Mexican-US relations. (S NF)

Castro took advantage of his visit, for example, to blast the United States for its treatment of illegal Mexican immigrants. He also made a point of reiterating Cuba's support "for the wise, patriotic, and courageous Mexican oil policy, which has decided to subordinate the energy wealth to national interests and not to industrialized capitalist nations." (S NF)

The focus on the US naval base at Guantanamo Bay and the US economic "blockade" in both Castro's comments to the press and the final communique is a solid indication that Cuba intends to belabor the United States on these two issues at the nonaligned summit in Havana and most likely later at the UN General Assembly. Castro apparently sees little chance of any significant improvement in relations with Washington until after the 1980 elections and probably believes Cuban pressure on these points will cost him little while keeping the United States on the defensive. (S NF)

Castro clearly enjoyed the brief respite that his visit provided from the mounting problems at home, but he undoubtedly would have preferred the greater public exposure that a trip to Mexico City would have ensured.

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The publicity that accompanied the trips to Mexico of Pope John Paul II, President Carter, and French President Giscard d'Estaing probably suggested that a road show of his own would enhance Cuba's international image at a time when many Third World leaders are debating the advisability of accepting his invitation to attend the nonaligned summit. He presumably settled for Cozumel on the advice of his security officials. (S NF)

While the summit proved useful to Castro in allowing him to establish a personal relationship with Lopez Portillo, the Cubans were doubtless disquieted by the Mexican President's decision to oust Secretary of Government Reyes Heróles and Foreign Secretary Roel on the eve of the visit.

Havana probably expected little in the way of substantive bilateral economic cooperation. Havana realizes that Mexico offers a very limited market for Cuban exports—\$2.4 million in 1977—given Mexican self-sufficiency in sugar and Cuba's prior commitment of most of its other salable commodities. On the import side, Cuba's serious hard currency shortage and the limited availability of Mexican credits argue against any major increase in Cuban purchases from Mexico beyond the present \$30 million annual level. The limited potential for bilateral trade is underscored in the summit's communique, which placed heavy emphasis on *potential* economic cooperation. (S NF)

Prospects

The basic relationship between Mexico and Cuba is not expected to change significantly in the immediate future. There may be greater solidarity on some international issues, but this will be primarily symbolic. There does not appear to be any strong prospect for a significant increase in economic relations. Mexico has little need for Cuban exports, and Lopez Portillo's economic plans do not appear to envision granting credits on a scale that Cuba would require to buy significantly larger amounts of Mexican goods. (S NF)

Lopez Portillo may accept Castro's invitation to attend the nonaligned summit, given the Mexican President's apparent new interest in foreign policy. Lopez Portillo might be allowed to address the meeting, and in any case Mexico would participate as an observer, which would allow it to claim neutrality on the more controversial

issues. At present, Lopez Portillo does not appear inclined to join the movement, but his attendance at the summit would be a much more meaningful indicator of Third World interests than the Cozumel meeting. (S NF NC OC)

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Mexico will probably continue to support Cuba's bid for a seat this year on the UN Security Council, however, since Lopez Portillo probably sees no good reason to recant on the commitment he has already made. (S NF NC)

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On Nicaragua, Mexico probably wants what everyone else wants: Somoza's replacement by a stable democratic government. In addition to his general and specific moral concerns, however, Lopez Portillo may see Mexico's interests directly jeopardized by destabilization of the Central American region. If Lopez Portillo's current effort to isolate Somoza diplomatically does not prosper, however, it does not seem likely that he will venture outside the political security of a multilateral initiative. Direct support to the Sandinista guerrillas—similar to aid given by Panama and Venezuela—is improbable. (S NF)

Although the break with Nicaragua is out of character for Mexico, it accords with other suggestions that Lopez Portillo may be inaugurating a new activist foreign policy. His first year or so in office was essentially introspective as he worked to restore economic stability. In the past year, however, he has increasingly focused attention on foreign affairs. He has made state visits to the USSR, Japan, and China, and has entertained the heads of state of France, the United States, and Cuba, as well as the Pope. The Mexican President is also planning to address the UN in September to propose an approach to world energy as the responsibility of mankind. (S NF)

Since this initiative at the UN will probably include supplier swaps as an ingredient in more efficient energy use, Lopez Portillo may feel under some pressure to work out the differences with the USSR over the quadri-lateral oil deal. Moreover, in addition to Mexico's share of the transportation savings, shipping oil to Cuba would deflect public fallout from any future natural gas sale to the United States. (S NF)

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